

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
IN OPPOSITION TO
L.D. 801**

“An Act To Ensure Safe and Humane Bear Hunting Practices”

SPONSORED BY: Representative BATES of Westbrook.

DATE OF HEARING: May 12, 2015

Good afternoon Senator Davis, Representative Shaw and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Judy Camuso, Wildlife Division Director at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in opposition to **L.D. 801**.

Title 12 §10051 states “The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife is established to preserve, protect and enhance the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife resources of the State; to encourage the wise use of these resources; to ensure coordinated planning for the future use and preservation of these resources; and to provide for effective management of these resources.”

L.D. 801 prohibits a person from hunting bear with the use of dogs. The bill also makes a violation of that prohibition a Class D crime and a Class C crime for a 3rd or subsequent offense. It provides an exemption for the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to allow for the hunting of bear with the use of dogs for public safety or research purposes. This bill will eliminate or limit an important tool used by wildlife managers to maintain wildlife populations at biologically and socially acceptable levels. Harvest tools allow the Department to adjust bear harvest regulations to ensure the conservation of Maine’s black bears and wise use of the resource, while reducing conflicts between people and bears.

Maine has the largest black bear population in the East and one of the largest in the country. To prevent Maine’s bear population from growing, we need to harvest between 3,500 and 4,500 bears annually. Since 2005, our harvest has averaged 3,000 bears and our population grew from 23,000 to over 30,000 bears. Hunting with hounds accounts for approximately 10-15% of our annual harvest. Even with all methods we are not meeting our annual harvest objective. Eliminating any of our harvest management tools would greatly compromise our ability to manage the State’s bear population.

Black bear populations are increasing across their range and states throughout the east are looking for ways to increase hunting opportunity and bear harvest levels. Over half of the states that allow bear hunting allow the use of dogs. For the first time in recent history, the entire state of Massachusetts is now open to black bear hunting, including Suffolk County and the suburban areas around Boston. The state of Florida is looking to enact their first black bear hunt since 1994, the states of New Jersey and New York are both expanding the seasons and areas open to hunting black bears. Other states are considering adding new methods of harvest to what they currently allow. At times, appropriate wildlife management includes increasing hunting opportunity. The reduction of even one form of harvest will hamper the Department's ability to meet publically derived bear population objectives of stabilizing growth.

Our black bear population is well managed and our bears generally avoid people. We have relatively few conflicts and very few severe conflicts, but this could change if bears become more common, particularly in southern and coastal Maine. Other states have a very different experience with conflicts between bears and people accounting for much of their program activities. In a recent workshop of the eastern black bear managers, one entire day of a three day program was dedicated to dealing with aggressive bears and another to responding to conflicts. This bill would allow for the use of hounds to manage nuisance animals, but not as a valid harvest method. The use of hounds can be very challenging in more suburban settings where nuisance complaints typically occur. This tool is best used as part of regulated hunting seasons to prevent the bear population from moving into those suburban environments in the first place. If eliminated as a valid harvest method, the use of hounds to resolve conflicts with bears (in certain areas) or to use hounds for wildlife research would also be effectively eliminated or could incur a cost to taxpayers since private individuals would not continue to raise and train bear hounds without a hunting season thus requiring the state to do so in order to maintain this tool.

Bear Management in Maine is based on sound science and publicly derived goals and objectives. The use of dogs are important wildlife management tools that help maintain the Maine bear and other wildlife population at acceptable levels while limiting nuisance problems and contributing to public safety. The Department will continue to refine our bear management system to account for advances in population modeling, additional data we have gathered from our bear monitoring program, legislative mandates, and the public input we receive as part of our ongoing Species Management Process.

This same hunting method was addressed in the 2004 referendum as well as the referendum this past fall and both times the referendums were rejected by the people of Maine. From the Department's perspective the only things that have changed are: the bear population has continued to grow to an all-time high of over 30,000 animals, the science supporting bear management is even stronger and more compelling today, and the need for active management to control the bear population is more important than ever.

I would be glad to answer any questions at this time or during the work session.